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ABSTRACT

Even for gifted students, the writing process resulting in an effective composition is a complex one, often overlooked in gifted education. The process begins with expressive writing, wherein the writer explores ideas and tries to find a focus. Subsets in the writing process include inventing, gathering outside materials, drafting, and revising and editing. Assigning student journals not only gets students started on an expressive writing project, it can achieve a number of other educational objectives: (1) starting classroom discussions, (2) focusing attention on salient points, (3) summarizing germane materials, (4) reorienting classes, (5) evoking responses to films and readings, (6) generating paper topics, (7) creating a personal dialogue with students, (8) encouraging students to air frustrations, and (9) helping students relax and enjoy writing. In addition to all the creative possibilities, journals make the teacher's job easier because they need be read only every two weeks or so and seldom require more than five or ten minutes to assess. Staggering students' due dates lessens the work load even more. Teaching students to write should be viewed as a longitudinal developmental process that occurs most effectively when it is developed across the curriculum, and involves all teachers from kindergarten through grade 12. (Nine references are included.) (AEW)

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THE GIFTED AND WRITING

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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INTRODUCTION

All too often, education of the gifted is so over-focused on acceleration and higher order thinking that little attention is paid to certain of "the basics". Specifically, fundamental writing procedures are frequently neglected. Inasmuch as we live in a highly verbal society, and much of our communication is via the printed word, it is imperative that we prepare the gifted to write well.

We tend to rely too heavily on the hope that gifted children will simply "pick up" writing abilities, as if by osmosis. Unfortunately, this too seldom happens, and even highly gifted students need guidance in developing and improving their writing. This paper will review some of the main components of effective writing, describe elements of James Britton's model of poetic, transactional, and expressive writing, and discuss a few ways techniques of expressive journal writing can be used to help students learn better and become better writers.

WRITING AS PROCESS

First of all, writing is most usefully viewed as a process involving the writer and his/her audience. The writing process resulting in a fully effective written composition is a complex and often difficult one. The most successful teachers give their young writers a good deal of support, encouragement, and active assistance--especially during the uncertain early stages of the procedure, when anxious writers most need reassurance.

The process begins with what James Britton terms "expressive" writing (1970, 1975). During this phase, the writer is primarily trying to explore ideas and find a focus. During subsequent stages, writers seek to organize and objectify their work, creating a working draft or drafts which body forth their ideas, concepts, and modes of expressing them. These drafts allow writers to distance themselves from and develop a critical perspective upon their creation.

Drafts also allow writers to revise ideas and expressions while developing a notion of the direction in which their composition is going. Later drafts are where most writers focus on mechanical and other editorial matters, such as reconstructing sentences, correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar, and finishing necessary documentation. Most commonly, the later stages in the writing process involve various forms of "tightening up" and "polishing." Britton terms the final product--organized, focused, corrected, satisfactorily articulated, and documented--"transactional writing".

IMPORTANT SUB-STEPS IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The process outlined above usually involves several sub-steps. Four commonly identified stages are described and explained briefly below.

I. Getting Started: Inventing

The first step consists, very simply, of getting started. We have found it helpful in our own writing to recall the saying "Writers write!" as a motivator to putting pen to paper or

fingers to the keyboard. Whatever method writers employ, the immediate aim is to invent: to generate some writing, to produce words, to articulate "material", such as ideas, concepts, examples, phrases, lists, and to "get the juices flowing."

The crucial invention stage can be facilitated by the writer's use of heuristics or techniques such as brainstorming or free-writing. Heuristics are problem-solving procedures or lists of questions or subjects designed to help writers think systematically about, uncover facets of, and explore a topic. For example, the "F.A.S.T. System" involves writers focusing attention first on the "Feelings" evoked in themselves and others by the topic. Then in turn, they probe their topic in terms of "Alternate viewpoints," the "Senses", and "Time", exploring the ideas generated while they are considering their subject from these multiple perspectives (Steele, 1985).

Other tactics to produce expressive writing include free association techniques such as brainstorming and free-writing. To brainstorm, a writer or group of writers generates ideas by focusing on a subject, then rapidly compiling a list of all ideas that come to mind in a brief, specified time period, usually ten or fifteen minutes. Brainstorming usually works best when practitioners aim for broad coverage of a topic rather than for depth, and brainstorming lists can help writers make many preliminary decisions about the scope, focus, and content of their work. Similar to brainstorming, free-writing involves writers in a short, perhaps ten or fifteen minute, timed, rapid, nonstop effort to write "all that they know" about a topic or subtopic.

These "discovery" techniques help writers generate ideas, multiply their perspectives upon and awareness of aspects of their subjects, and help them become aware of what they know, what they don't know, and what they need to know in order to produce a full treatment of the matter at hand. As writers progress through the invention stage, many find discovery techniques involving the right side of the brain especially helpful. Strategies such as outlining, drawing diagrams and flow charts, and clustering groups of ideas in ways that visually display their relationships are popular with many writers.

II. Gathering Outside Material: Searching

Once writers have examined their internal resources and know what they know, what they don't know, and what they need to know, they must usually initiate some sort of search process to find material to supplement what they already know. For some topics and kinds of writing, this may involve library work. For others, writers may need to do their own empirical research by making observations, interviewing others, taking accurate and sufficient notes, and perhaps designing and carrying out formal experiments.

III. Getting It On Paper: Drafting

Once writers have assembled all the information they need, their next task is usually to employ pen, pencil, typewriter, or word processor to develop the most effective way of presenting their data to their particular audience. This involves focusing upon, connecting, and articulating many strands of information while bearing in mind that fully effective presentation is virtually impossible without adequate audience analysis. Writers

must clearly imagine, understand, and "talk to" their readers carefully to insure that they receive the right message and respond to it in ways writers wish.

The drafting stage illustrates clearly the recursive procedures, the constant re-writing and modifying that characterizes the writing process. Drafting involves making many complex higher order decisions that often make necessary myriad adjustments in both content and manner of presentation. Drafting writers are deeply involved in an ongoing process of learning and change as the constantly develop, modify, and sometimes abandon aspects of their ideas and their ways of expressing them. For most writers, it is not until this drafting phase, where they "put it all together" in the light of their audience and purpose, that the true matter and final form of their composition begins to emerge.

IV. Polishing It Up: Revising and Editing

Next. the revision sub-stage involves re-reading one's own work. Many writers, especially less experienced ones, neglect this crucial operation. Students must be prompted to read their essays silently and/or aloud in order to re-evaluate and revise their thought processes and the stylistic features of their work and to correct any mechanical errors. Student writers who use a word processor may find editing slightly less painful, while "cut and paste" tactics involving scissors, tape, liquid paper, and a copy machine may help alleviate the drudgery of retyping.

Feedback, especially positive feedback, from teachers and other significant others usually has a salutary effect on

writers' work. Peer group assistance can be helpful throughout the writing process, but can be especially useful during the revising/editing stage. Peers can cast fresh eyes on compositions, catching misspellings, grammar, punctuation and syntax problems. faulty logic, infelicitous phrasing, or insufficient sensitivity to audience needs. During final revising/editing, writers can sharpen and clarify their message while verifying all documentation.

As we remarked, the writing stages sketched above are not part of a fixed, step-by-step procedure, but recursive. Each and every procedure a writer performs while composing can and often does occur at any point and many times during the process.

THREE KINDS OF WRITING

There are, of course, many different forms of writing. In a very real sense, each piece of writing is unique. However, James Britton has developed a schemata that is pedagogically useful for differentiating between three basic kinds of written communication: poetic, transactional, and expressive writing.

When creating <u>poetic</u> writing, writers use language primarily as material with which to create an art object. This type of writing, manifested in fiction, poetry, drama, and certain forms of the essay, tends to be imaginative and unconventional. Ultimately, poetic writing is its own <u>raison d'etre</u>.

In contrast, <u>transactional</u> writing is aimed at communication with an audience for a specific purpose. Term or research papers are examples, but any report, memo, proposal or other form of

writing aimed at communicating information in a clear, conventional, credible format can be said to be transactional.

Expressive writing, as our above discussion of the early stages of the writing process points out, is a means for writers to discover what they perceive, think, feel, know, and don't know. Many journals and diaries are primarily expressive, as are many letters and first drafts of what will later become transactional writing. Essentially informal and "writer based," expressive writing is very similar to extemporaneous speech.

Expressive writing can be especially useful as a means to facilitate both cognitive development and the development of writing abilities. Unfortunately, it is often neglected in favor of more formal, easily evaluated "creative" poetic writing or finished transactional compositions.

Following this background sketch of the writing process and three basic kinks of writing, let us turn to the issue of improving the writing of students. As Squire points out, research shows clearly that without extensive writing experience, students are unlikely to make significant progress as writers (1982).

In this light, it seems clear that we need to discover and develop tasks and assignments that allow students to do a lot of writing without drowning their teachers in a deluge of papers to criticize and grade. As writing across the curriculum practitioners have found, one of the most effective strategies to get students to write more without adding appreciably to teacher workloads is the use of expressive journals (Fulwiler, 1980).

JOURNALS: USING EXPRESSIVE WRITING TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN--AND LEARN TO WRITE

Since long before Ben Franklin's time, diaries, journals, and almanacs have provided popular ways of keeping notes and recording thoughts, observations, feelings and ideas. Keeping a journal can not only help students improve their writing, it can achieve a number of other valuable educational objectives. For example, teachers can use journals fruitfully to

<> start classroom discussions,
<> focus attention on salient points,
<> summarize germane material,
<> re-orient classes,
<> evoke responses to films, speakers, readings, etc.,
<> generate paper topics and research projects,
<> create a personal dialog with students,
<> encourage students to complain and let off steam, and
<> help students to relax and enjoy writing.

The following illustrates a few of these ways journals can be used to help students learn and learn to write.

Using Journals to Start Classroom Discussions. Teachers can begin discussions with a five minute freewriting session in which students explore the topic to be discussed, or with a five minute session in which they respond in writing to specific questions about the contents of an assigned reading. This helps focus students' attention, allows them to review and analyze their information, and helps promote fruitful discussions.

Students may be asked, for example, to relate the topic in question to their own concerns, or to list what they feel to be the three most important points made in a homework assignment. These techniques induce students to commit ideas and thoughts to writing, view material more objectively, and discover gaps or

misconceptions in their knowledge while reinforcing learning and promoting retention.

Using Journals to Focus Attention on Salient Points. Students might be asked to spend five minutes of class time reacting in writing to the contents of a lecture, film, discussion, etc. which has just been presented. This is also a good reinforcement technique which teachers can use to induce students to relate, analyze, and remember ideas and their reactions to them.

Using Journals to Summarize Germane Materials. Requiring students to write brief summaries of readings, lectures, discussions, etc. prompts them to engage and analyze ideas and experience as well as to retain information better.

Using Journals to Re-orient Classes. Teachers can often salvage classes that are not progressing satisfactorily with a five to ten minute freewriting session on the topic under discussion. Such a session can produce material students can read aloud to one another in small groups. This writing often evokes responses, exposes problems and gaps in learning, revives interest, and reinforces concepts while helping students to commit material to long term memory.

Using Journals to Produce Responses to Films, Speakers, Readings, etc.. Teachers can use techniques outlined above to induce students to write, explore, identify knowledge gaps, analyze, and remember. Journals containing responses to questions, assigned topics, personal and educational experiences, etc., provide invaluable retrospective records of students'

intellectual and emotional evolution through a course, semester, year, stage of development, or educational career.

Using Journals to Generate Paper Topics and Research Projects. Teachers can induce students to use freewriting, brainstorming, outlining, flow-charting, clustering, and other generating strategies like those sketched above as fruitful journalizing aids.

Using Journals to Create a Personal Dialog with Students. Journals can help teachers to provide encouragement and other forms of feedback on a one-to-one basis. Teachers can praise the work of students while making them aware of omissions in their thought or flaws in their reasoning and suggesting other notions they might consider or explore. The one-to-one teacher-student relationships journals make possible enable teachers to monitor and respond regularly and in a timely manner to students' thoughts, feelings, and overall development more closely than most other practical pedagogical techniques.

Using Journals to Encourage Students to Complain and Let Off Steam. Students encouraged to write candidly in journals whose quality is judged on the basis of writers' commitment to and engagement in the task at hand--rather than on "right" or "wrong" answers or on decorum--very often develop a fascination with the sheer expressive, emotive power of language.

Using Journals to Help Students to Relax and Enjoy Writing. Students who regularly perform the kinds of cognition promoting expressive writing described above in addition to their finished poetic and transactional, graded writings, and who share their

compositions regularly among their peers, become far more aware of the many ways writing can be used to aid learning. This encourages them to write more and to enjoy their writing. And students who enjoy writing are on the way towards becoming excellent writers and thinkers.

All in all, the writing-learning possibilities of journals are limited only by the ingenuity of individual teachers. In addition to the almost inexhaustible possibilities of journals, they can be easily read (once every two weeks or so), commented in, and assessed. We find that the task of overseeing eighty or ninety expressive writers is easily managed if nine or ten are required to submit their journals each school day so that we can review them and return them the next day. We seldom need to spend more than five to ten minutes to monitor adequately any journal, and staggering the due dates spreads out the work load.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has been aimed at sensitizing teachers and parents to a neglected realm in gifted education--writing instruction. The authors offered a process view of composing, outlined aspects of James Britton's model of the writing process, and discussed techniques for using expressive journals to help students learn and learn to write.

Although the aforementioned tactics and techniques should prove helpful, teachers and administrators must realize that developing thinkers and writers takes time, practice, and a good deal of hard work and patience. Teaching students to write must

be viewed as a longitudinal developmental process that occurs most effectively when it is developed across the curriculum (Fulwiler, 1985). All teachers from K-12 should be involved.

While intensive writing workshops are popular and often enjoyable and helpful, they cannot substitute for long term, on-going writing instruction and practice. As Squire points out, the more time students spend on task, writing, the better chance they stand of becoming effective writers.

Those wishing further information concerning techniques for developing writing programs and program components are encouraged to investigate Britton's work, the Johns Hopkins Model of Writing Instruction for Verbally Talented Youth (Reynolds, Kopelke, and Durden, 1984), Donald Murray's Write to Learn (1984), and Janet Emig's The Wed of Meaning (1983).

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